

**Systematic Theology for the Local Church**  
**#71—Anthropology—VIII<sup>1</sup>**  
**The Theology of Femininity**  
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Helpful for the studies in biblical anthropology are House, section 46, and Reymond, 415-430.

The wholesale introduction and adoption into the home of unbiblical values in the West has seriously blurred the rules that men and women followed in society for centuries. It is certainly difficult for anyone to know how to live in a family today. This is no less true for the Christian woman. As with the roles of men, the reason for such confusion is because women do not know why they exist. There is a detailed and powerful theology of femininity that the world rejects, and many Christian women either do not know or are in error about. The Bible provides sufficient teaching—in both positive and negative form—to help women to know what their purpose is and how they should live it out.

### 1. Danger areas for Christian women today

We could identify many ways in which women today are tricked or fail to fulfill biblical roles.

- Buying into the tenets of secular or evangelical feminism, with its severe and unbiblical blurring of roles for men and women. This would involve demanding equal decision-making authority in the family, equal or superior and separate career objectives and other changes from the traditional family.
- Experiencing lack of fulfillment or thinking there is a lack of fulfillment, seen at times in discouragement and aimlessness or busy-ness as an escape.
- Lack of submission to her husband that comes out in various ways:
  - Nagging her husband
  - Outright bossing her husband
  - Attempting to get around him by manipulating and minimizing his leadership (do we ever see a situational comedy about the family on television where the father is anything but a bumbling fool?)
  - Demeaning her husband before others
  - Asserting her “freedom” behind her husband’s back (“My husband doesn’t want me to do this, but. . .”)
  - Acting to get attention through her words and deeds—showing that she puts herself first
  - If she works, putting her career ahead of her husband’s
  - Illicit sexual conduct that betrays a failure of intimacy with her husband.
  - Showing lack of attention to her husband’s needs and putting her own interests first (remember, it’s wrong for a husband to do that, too.)

I think Carolyn Mahaney has a good illustration of the last problem:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Femininity: Developing a Biblical Perspective” in *Biblical Womanhood in the Home* by Nancy Lee DeMoss (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 25-26.

Wives, we all have the same job description: We are our husbands' helpers. If you are wondering whether or not to pursue some particular endeavor, ask yourself this important question: *Does this help my husband?* Usually that one simple question will make your decision clear. My problem is that all too often I forget to ask that question. In fact, I have to confess that my orientation is often really toward myself rather than toward my husband. On numerous occasions I have made choices or pursued opportunities that served me rather than my husband. This tendency is frequently illustrated in the mundane tasks of life. Recently I was cleaning out several disorganized cabinets in my kitchen. As I was working, I remembered the bathroom cabinet, which was also in dire need of cleaning. On several occasions as my husband had rummaged around that disheveled bathroom cabinet, he had graciously asked me when I thought I could get to that project. I usually informed him that I just didn't have time at present, but that I would get to it as soon as I could. However, as I was cleaning out the kitchen cabinets that day, I realized the problem was not that I didn't have the time to clean the bathroom cabinet; the truth was that I didn't really *care* about the bathroom cabinet. I wanted the kitchen cabinets clean because that served *my* purposes. My orientation was not directed toward my husband and his preferences—it was directed toward me.

While many of the errors we have listed apply to married women, many can be found in unmarried women also. While many of the examples and points in this study refer to married women, the basic principles concerning the reason for creation of woman apply to both single and married women. There are many helps for the single woman available at the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood web site.

## 2. The nature of biblical roles for women

The Bible clearly lays out patterns of behavior for many classes of human beings. A 'role' consists of patterns of behavior carried out in various situations. The woman's role is not the same as the man's. I once opened a fortune cookie in a Chinese restaurant and had this confirmed in a simple but brilliant way. It said, "A woman's greatest mistake is to try to be like a man." I don't ordinarily put any stock in fortune cookie messages, but this one happened to be exactly right. Understanding the woman's role depends on understanding why and how God made her.

### A. The woman's origin

Here is the text of the crucial passage in Genesis that describes Eve's creation, 2:15-25:

<sup>15</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. <sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; <sup>17</sup> but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." <sup>18</sup> The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." <sup>19</sup> Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. <sup>20</sup> So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. <sup>21</sup> So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. <sup>22</sup> Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. <sup>23</sup> The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,<sup>j</sup>' for she was taken out of man." <sup>24</sup> For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united

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<sup>j</sup>The Hebrew for *woman* sounds like the Hebrew for *man*.

to his wife, and they will become one flesh.<sup>25</sup> The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

In our study entitled “The Theology of Sexuality” we emphasized that Adam and Eve are archetypes of all males and females to follow and that Eve’s makeup as a person and her role in life spring from the way she was created. The detailed account that explains her origin emphasizes her role as helper and the need for both man and woman to be united—actually, re-united, after the division of mankind (originally Adam by himself) into two types (Adam and Eve). In his study entitled “Male and Female Complementarity and the Image of God,”<sup>3</sup> Bruce Ware describes this division and the counterpart nature of the result:

Clearly the intention of the text is to say both that the man and the woman share a common humanity and equal worth before God (hence, both are “man”), and yet they do so not as identicals (hence, they are distinctly “male and female”). Genesis 5:1-2 only confirms and reinforces this understanding. Here, we read: “This is the written account of Adam’s line. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them ‘man.’” As with Genesis 1:26-27, we see the common identity of male and female, both named “man,” and yet the male and the female is each a distinct expression of this common and equally possessed nature of “man.” As is often observed, since this was written in a patriarchal cultural context, it is remarkable that the biblical writer chose to identify the female along with the male as of the exact same name and nature as “man.” Male and female are equal in essence and so equal in dignity, worth, and importance.

Carol Mahaney provides a woman’s perspective on the sovereignty of God and femininity:<sup>4</sup>

This passage shows that woman was the beautiful handiwork of God our Creator. Woman was God’s idea, His creation. In fact, as we read the whole account of God’s brilliant creation production, we discover that the woman was the finishing design of all that He created. She was the last act. Dare we say that God left the best for last? (I don’t think we can take too much pride in that fact when we remember who was the first to eat the forbidden fruit!)

The important point here is that *God* created us, and being the creation of God determines everything for us as women. We don’t look to our culture to find our feminine identity; we don’t consult our feelings to discover our purpose. Everything that we are and everything that we do must be rooted in God. It’s not mere chance that we are women—our gender is not accidental. We were intentionally and purposefully created. We are the planned and foreordained determination of an all-wise, all-powerful, and all-loving God.

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That means when God created the first woman, He made a fully feminine creature. You and I did not become feminine because someone gave us a doll and put a dress on us—we were born feminine because we were *created* feminine.

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<sup>3</sup> “Male and Female Complementarity and the Image of God” in *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 7/1 (Spring 2002), 14-23.

<sup>4</sup> Maheny, 22-23.

The feminist doctrine of our time upholds the notion that femininity is a matter of cultural conditioning. Many feminists argue that the only essential difference between men and women is our anatomy, but Genesis teaches otherwise. Because God created male and female, we women are innately feminine. Granted, a woman can accentuate her femininity or she can detract from it, but she cannot change it—our sex chromosomes are in every cell of our bodies. Our femininity is a gift of grace from a loving God.

Genesis 1:27 tells us that these two human beings were made in God's image:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Ware addresses the question of how male and female bear the image of God and sees the key to the answer in the way Eve was created:<sup>5</sup>

It appears, then, that just as Seth becomes the image of God through his origination from his father, being born in the likeness and image of Adam (Gen. 5:3), so too does the woman become the image of God that she surely is (Gen. 1:27) through (and by God's intentional design, *only* through) her origination from the man and as the glory of the man (Gen. 2:21-23 and 1 Cor. 11:7-9). What this suggests, then, is that the concept of male-headship is relevant not only to the question of how men and women are to relate and work together, but it seems also true that male-headship is a part of the very constitution of the woman being created in the image of God. Man is a human being made in the image of God first; woman becomes a human being bearing the image of God only through the man. While both are fully and equally the image of God, there is a built-in priority given to the male that reflects God's design of male-headship in the created order.

## B. The helper role

The first woman was created to be a helper. Today many women do not want to be helpers; they want to be helped. But a woman will find her greatest fulfillment in that role. Maheny<sup>6</sup> quotes Douglas Wilson concerning the helping role in relation to the man:<sup>7</sup>

Author Douglas Wilson provides a wonderful portrait of a godly, complementary marriage:

The man needs the help; the woman needs to help. Marriage was created by God to provide a companionship in the labor of dominion. The cultural mandate, the requirement to fill and subdue the earth, is still in force, and a husband cannot fulfill this portion of the task in isolation. He needs a companion suitable for him in the work to which God has called him. He is called to the work and must receive help from her. She is called to the work through ministering to him. He is oriented to the task, and she is oriented to him.

Paul confirms this in 1 Cor. 11:8-9 (where it is made the basis for one of the reasons for a woman's wearing a headcovering in the meeting of the local church):

<sup>8</sup> For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; <sup>9</sup> neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. <sup>10</sup> For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.

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<sup>5</sup> Ware, 19-20.

<sup>6</sup> Maheny, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Wilson, *Reforming Marriage* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1995), 19.

Here is the *Bible Knowledge Commentary* on the helping role as it was originally established:<sup>8</sup>

God decided to **make a helper suitable** (lit., “a helper corresponding to him,” or “a corresponding helper”) **for** the man (v. 18). “Helper” is not a demeaning term; it is often used in Scripture to describe God Almighty (e.g., Pss. 33:20; 70:5; 115:9, where it is trans. “help” in the NIV). The description of her as “corresponding to him” means basically that what was said about him in Genesis 2:7 was also true of her. They both had the same nature. But what man lacked (his aloneness was not good) she supplied, and what she lacked he supplied. The culmination was **one flesh** (v. 24)—the complete unity of man and woman in marriage. Since Adam and Eve were a spiritual unity, living in integrity without sin, there was no need for instruction here on headship. Paul later discussed that in relationship to the order of Creation (1 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim. 2:13).

There are many serious fallacies in the logic used by secular and evangelical feminists today. One is that of saying that differences are wrong—all distinctions have to be erased and leveled. We need to affirm that God built distinctions into the universe. Some stars are more visible than others. Some planets are bigger than others. Some people are taller than others. Some people are smarter than others. Some people are more talented than others. Some are more coordinated and athletic than others. And the Trinity itself differs in regard to roles and functions. The first Person did not take on a human body to die on the Cross, the second Person did. The universe was not created for the Holy Spirit, but for the Son. The Son is not the seal of our inheritance, the Spirit is. Do we think that the Persons of the Trinity ever argue over their roles?

Note that in 1 Cor. 11:3 Paul uses just this biblical fact to underscore the role distinctions between men and women. There is an authoritative hierarchy in the Trinity that relates to human beings, and there is a similar authority structure between men and women that God wants us to follow:

<sup>3</sup> Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

### C. Carrying out the helping role in the biblical family

How is the woman’s role best carried out in marriage? Paul tells us in Eph. 5:22-24 that the wife is to submit to her husband:

<sup>22</sup> Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

This submission role is so important that Paul commands it twice. Both times it is connected to something else. The first time, it is part of her relation to Jesus Christ. When a woman submits to her husband, she is being in subjection to God. It is that simple. If she is not in submission to her husband, she is not in submission to God. Lest someone think that this would lead to her being demeaned, notice that the text says that the husband is to cherish her and help her to grow. This is biblical balance.

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<sup>8</sup> Walvoord, John F.; Zuck, Roy B.; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentar : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:31

I believe that one of the hardest things for a wife to do is to submit to her husband. It does not come naturally. The old nature always pulls her in the opposite direction. If a woman cannot submit to her husband, then her problem is not only with her husband, but with her relation to God.

What if the husband makes poor decisions? As with everything in the Christian life, if she does what is right according to Scripture, God does not hold her responsible for what someone else fails to do right.

In Ephesians 5 the wife's submission is taught in the midst of a passage on spirituality and multi-directional submission in the Body of Christ. No Christian woman can claim she is spiritual and right with God if her relation toward her husband is not also right.

1 Peter. 3:1-7 provides further insight into the meaning of submission:

**3** Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives,<sup>2</sup> when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.<sup>3</sup> Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes.<sup>4</sup> Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.<sup>5</sup> For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands,<sup>6</sup> like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

<sup>7</sup> Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

Wayne Grudem draws several points from 1 Peter about what submission does and does not mean.<sup>9</sup> Here is a list extracted from his chapter entitled "Wives Like Sarah, and the Husbands Who Honor Them: 1 Peter 3:1-7":

#### A. What Submission Does Not Mean

1. Submission does not mean putting a husband in the place of Christ.
2. Submission does not mean giving up independent thought.
3. Submission does not mean a wife should give up efforts to influence and guide her husband.
4. Submission does not mean a wife should give in to every demand of her husband.
5. Submission is not based on lesser intelligence or competence.
6. Submission does not mean being fearful or timid.
7. Submission is not inconsistent with equality in Christ.

#### B. What Submission Does Mean

1. Submission is an inner quality of gentleness that affirms the leadership of the husband.
2. Submission involves obedience like Sarah's.
3. Submission acknowledges an authority that is not totally mutual.

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<sup>9</sup> John Piper and Wayne Grudem, Eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, (Wheaton, IL:Crossway Books, 1991), 194-98.

### 3. A biblical example of a complementary helper: Prov 31:10-31

This passage provides more than any other in Scripture a window into how a woman can live out her femininity:

10 <sup>a</sup> A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.  
11 Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.  
12 She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.  
13 She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.  
14 She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar.  
15 She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.  
16 She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.  
17 She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.  
18 She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.  
19 In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.  
20 She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.  
21 When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.  
22 She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.  
23 Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.  
24 She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes.  
25 She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.  
26 She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.  
27 She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.  
28 Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:  
29 “Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.”  
30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.  
31 Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

Let's look at this great passage for some of its details

Verse 10: The Bible predicts that there will be few of this kind of woman. Her significance lies in her character, not in her physical attractiveness or verbal ability.

Verse 11: Her husband delegates tasks to her. He is the leader here as in Eph. 5. He is ultimately accountable, but is wise in furthering the development of this kind of woman.

Verse 12: The Bible states her role in relation to her husband, not to herself independently. Her life is one of serving her husband.

Verses 13-26: She is a businesswoman outside and inside her home. She does handwork, goes shopping, cooks, owns real estate, buys and sells real estate, saves and invests her money, provides for the poor and sews for her family.

Verse 26: She has biblical wisdom.

Verse 27: All her business activities are designed to help her family.

Verse 30: She demonstrates genuine spirituality: she fears the Lord and translates this into loving activity for her husband and family. Notice that according to v. 23 her husband is not a loafer or loiterer. He is a respected elder in Israel ruling in his town. Why is this mentioned here? Because his wife's activity and life have contributed to what he is.

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<sup>a</sup> Verses 10-31 are an acrostic, each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

I conclude with the words of Elizabeth Elliott, in a chapter in *Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* entitled “The Essence of Femininity”:<sup>10</sup>

The world looks for happiness through self-assertion. The Christian knows that joy is found in self-abandonment. “If a man will let himself be lost for My sake,” Jesus said, “he will find his true self.” A Christian woman’s true freedom lies on the other side of a very small gate—humble obedience—but that gate leads out into a largeness of life undreamed of by the liberators of the world, to a place where the God-given differentiation between the sexes is not obfuscated but celebrated, where our inequalities are seen as essential to the image of God, for it is in male and female, in male as male and female as female, not as two identical and interchangeable halves, that the image is manifested.

To gloss over these profundities is to deprive women of the central answer to the cry of their hearts, “Who am I?” No one but the Author of the Story can answer that cry.

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<sup>10</sup> 398.

I provide here the portion of John Piper's chapter in *Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* ("A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible") that attempts to formulate the femininity is according to Scripture and provides a bridge from his descriptions of biblical masculinity and femininity to the rest of the book.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Meaning of Femininity**

A significant aspect of femininity is how a woman responds to the pattern of initiatives established by mature masculinity. This is why I have discussed masculinity first. Much of the meaning of womanhood is clearly implied in what I have said already about manhood-in the same way that the moves of one ballet dancer would be implied if you described the moves of the other. Nevertheless it is important now to focus on the description of womanhood given earlier and unfold its meaning for the sake of a balanced and attractive portrait of manhood and womanhood.

AT THE HEART OF MATURE FEMININITY IS A FREEING DISPOSITION TO AFFIRM, RECEIVE AND NURTURE STRENGTH AND LEADERSHIP FROM WORTHY MEN IN WAYS APPROPRIATE TO A WOMAN'S DIFFERING RELATIONSHIPS.

"AT THE HEART OF . . ."

Again, this phrase signals that the definition of femininity is not exhaustive. There is more to femininity, but not less. I believe this is at the heart of what true womanhood means, even if there is a mystery to our complementary existence that we will never exhaust.

". . . MATURE FEMININITY . . ." The word "mature" implies that there are distortions of femininity. False or immature stereotypes are sometimes identified as the essence of femininity. Ronda Chervin, in her book *Feminine, Free and Faithful*, gives a list of what people commonly consider "positive feminine traits" and "negative feminine traits." The participants in her workshops say positively that women are

responsive, compassionate, empathetic, enduring, gentle, warm, tender, hospitable, receptive, diplomatic, considerate, polite, supportive, intuitive, wise, perceptive, sensitive, spiritual, sincere, vulnerable (in the sense of emotionally open), obedient, trusting, graceful, sweet, expressive, charming, delicate, quiet, sensually receptive (vs. prudish), faithful, pure.

Chervin lists the following women who exhibit many of these traits: Ruth, Naomi, Sarah, Mary (Jesus' mother), Cordelia of *King Lear*, Melanie in *Gone with the Wind*, Grace Kelly, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. On the other hand people often stereotype women with negative traits:

weak, passive, slavish, weepy, wishy-washy, seductive, flirtatious, vain, chatter-box, silly, sentimental, naive, moody, petty, catty, prudish, manipulative, complaining, nagging, pouty, smothering, spiteful.

It is plain then that when we talk of femininity we must make careful distinctions between distortions and God's original design. "Mature femininity" refers not to what sin has made of womanhood or what popular opinion makes of it, but what God willed for it to be at its best.

". . . IS A FREEING DISPOSITION . . ."

I focus on mature femininity as a disposition rather than a set of behaviors or roles because mature femininity will express itself in so many different ways depending on the situation. Hundreds of

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<sup>11</sup> 45-54.

behaviors may be feminine in one situation and not in another. And the specific acts that grow out of the disposition of womanhood vary considerably from relationship to relationship, not to mention from culture to culture.

For example, the Biblical reality of a wife's submission would take different forms depending on the quality of a husband's leadership. This can be seen best if we define submission not in terms of specific behaviors, but as a disposition to yield to the husband's authority and an inclination to follow his leadership. This is important to do because no submission of one human being to another is absolute. The husband does not replace Christ as the woman's supreme authority. She must never follow her husband's leadership into sin. She will not steal with him or get drunk with him or savor pornography with him or develop deceptive schemes with him.

But even where a Christian wife may have to stand with Christ against the sinful will of her husband, she can still have a spirit of submission—a disposition to yield. She can show by her attitude and behavior that she does not like resisting his will and that she longs for him to forsake sin and lead in righteousness so that her disposition to honor him as head can again produce harmony.

The disposition of mature femininity is experienced as freeing. This is because it accords with the truth of God's purpose in creation. It is the truth that frees (John 8:32).

There are sensations of unbounded independence that are not true freedom because they deny truth and are destined for calamity. For example, two women may jump from an airplane and experience the thrilling freedom of free-falling. But there is a difference: one is encumbered by a parachute on her back and the other is free from this burden. Which person is most free? The one without the parachute feels free—even freer, since she does not feel the constraints of the parachute straps. But she is not truly free. She is in bondage to the force of gravity and to the deception that all is well because she feels unencumbered. This false sense of freedom is in fact bondage to calamity which is sure to happen after a fleeting moment of pleasure.

That is the way many women (and men) today think of freedom. They judge it on the basis of immediate sensations of unrestrained license or independence. But true freedom takes God's reality and God's purpose for creation into account and seeks to fit smoothly into God's good design. Freedom does include doing what we want to do. But the mature and wise woman does not seek this freedom by bending reality to fit her desires. She seeks it by being transformed in the renewal of her desires to fit in with God's perfect will (Romans 12:2). The greatest freedom is found in being so changed by God's Spirit that you can do what you love to do and know that it conforms to the design of God and leads to life and glory.

God does not intend for women to be squelched or cramped or frustrated. But neither does he intend for women to do whatever seems to remove these feelings without regard to the appropriateness of the action. Sometimes freedom comes from outward changes in circumstances. Sometimes it comes from inward changes of the heart and mind. Many today say, for example, that true freedom for a lesbian would be the liberty to act according to her sexual preference.<sup>23</sup> But I would say that true freedom cannot ignore God's judgment on homosexual activity and God's will for men and women to be heterosexual in their sexual relations. Therefore true freedom is not giving in to our every impulse. It is the sometimes painful and exhilarating discovery of God's power to fight free from the bondage of our sinful selves.

I believe that the femininity to which God calls women is the path of freedom for every woman. It will not look the same in every woman. But it will lay responsibilities on all women in the same way that mature masculinity lays responsibilities on all men. Some of these we express very naturally. Others of

them we must grow into by prayer and faith and practice. But this process of growth is no more confining than the growth of a young woman toward patterns of mature behavior that enable her to act with natural freedom in the company of adults.

“. . . TO AFFIRM, RECEIVE AND NURTURE STRENGTH AND LEADERSHIP FROM WORTHY MEN . . .” “At the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman’s differing relationships.”

The “strength and leadership” referred to here is what was described above concerning the responsibility of mature masculinity to lead, provide and protect. The quality of that strength and leadership is captured in the phrase, “from worthy men.” I recognize that there is strength and leadership that is unworthy of a woman’s affirmation. I do not mean to define femininity merely as a response to whatever sinful men may happen to offer up. Mature femininity is rooted in a commitment to Christ as Lord and is discerning in what it approves. Mature femininity has a clear, Biblical vision of mature masculinity. Woman delights in it as man delights in mature femininity. Each gives the other the greatest scope for natural, pure, mature expression. But when a man does not possess mature masculinity the response of a mature woman is not to abandon her femininity. Rather, her femininity remains intact as a desire for things to be as God intended them to be. But she also recognizes that the natural expression of her womanhood will be hindered by the immaturity of the man in her presence.

My definition of the heart of femininity includes three words to describe the response of a woman to the strength and leadership of worthy men: affirm, receive and nurture.

“Affirm” means that mature women advocate the kind of masculine-feminine complementarity that we are describing here. This is important to stress because there may be occasions when women have no interaction with men and yet are still mature in their femininity. This is because femininity is a disposition to affirm the strength and leadership of worthy men, not just to experience it firsthand. It is also true, as we will see below, because there are unique feminine strengths and insights that women embody even before they can be given to any man.

“Receive” means that mature femininity feels natural and glad to accept the strength and leadership of worthy men. A mature woman is glad when a respectful, caring, upright man offers sensitive strength and provides a pattern of appropriate initiatives in their relationship. She does not want to reverse these roles. She is glad when he is not passive. She feels herself enhanced and honored and freed by his caring strength and servant-leadership.

“Nurture” means that a mature woman senses a responsibility not merely to receive, but to nurture and strengthen the resources of masculinity. She is to be his partner and assistant. She joins in the act of strength and shares in the process of leadership. She is, as Genesis 2:18 says, “a helper suitable for him.”

This may sound paradoxical—that she strengthens the strength she receives, and that she refines and extends the leadership she looks for. But it is not contradictory or unintelligible. There are strengths and insights that women bring to a relationship that are not brought by men. I do not mean to imply by my definition of femininity that women are merely recipients in relation to men. Mature women bring nurturing strengths and insights that make men stronger and wiser and that make the relationship richer.

Note: We need to heed a caution here about the differing strengths of men and women. Whenever anyone asks if we think women are, say, weaker than men, or smarter than men, or more easily frightened than men or something like that, a good answer would go like this: women are weaker in some ways and men are weaker in some ways; women are smarter in some ways and men are

smarter in some ways; women are more easily frightened in some kinds of circumstances and men are more easily frightened in other kinds of circumstances.

It is very misleading to put negative values on the so-called weaknesses that each of us has by virtue of our sexuality. God intends for all the “weaknesses” that are characteristically masculine to call forth and highlight woman’s strengths. And God intends for all the “weaknesses” that are characteristically feminine to call forth and highlight man’s strengths.

A person who naively assumes that men are superior because of their kind of strength might consider these statistics from 1983: six times more men than women are arrested for drug abuse. Ten times more men than women are arrested for drunkenness. Eightythree percent of serious crimes in America are committed by men. Twenty-five times more men than women are in jail. Virtually all rape is committed by men.

I point that out to show that boasting in either sex as superior to the other is a folly. Men and women as God created them are different in hundreds of ways. One helpful way to describe our equality and differences is this: Picture the so-called weaknesses and strengths of man and woman listed in two columns. If you could give a numerical value to each one the sum at the bottom of both columns is going to be the same. Whatever different minuses and pluses are on each side of masculinity and femininity are going to balance out. And when you take those two columns from each side and lay them, as it were, on top of each other, God intends them to be the perfect complement to each other, so that when life together is considered (and I don’t just mean married life) the weaknesses of manhood are not weaknesses and the weaknesses of woman are not weaknesses. They are the complements that call forth different strengths in each other.

If it is true that manhood and womanhood are to complement rather than duplicate each other, and if it is true that the way God made us is good, then we should be very slow to gather a list of typical male weaknesses or a list of typical female weaknesses and draw a conclusion that either is of less value than the other. Men and women are of equal value and dignity in the eyes of God—both created in the image of God and utterly unique in the universe.

“ . . . IN WAYS APPROPRIATE TO A WOMAN’S DIFFERING RELATIONSHIPS . . . ”

“At the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman’s differing relationships.”

Mature femininity does not express itself in the same way toward every man. A mature woman who is married, for example, does not welcome the same kind of strength and leadership from other men that she welcomes from her husband. But she will affirm and receive and nurture the strength and leadership of men in some form in all her relationships with men. This is true even though she may find herself in roles that put some men in a subordinate role to her. Without passing any judgment on the appropriateness of any of these roles one thinks of the following possible instances:

- Prime Minister and her counsellors and advisors.
- Principal and the teachers in her school.
- College teacher and her students.
- Bus driver and her passengers.
- Bookstore manager and her clerks and stock help.
- Staff doctor and her interns.
- Lawyer and her aides.
- Judge and the court personnel.
- Police officer and citizens in her precinct.

Legislator and her assistants.  
T.V. newscaster and her editors.  
Counsellor and her clients.

One or more of these roles might stretch appropriate expressions of femininity beyond the breaking point. But in any case, regardless of the relationships in which a woman finds herself, mature femininity will seek to express itself in appropriate ways. There are ways for a woman to interact even with a male subordinate that signal to him and others her endorsement of his mature manhood in relationship to her as a woman. I do not have in mind anything like sexual suggestiveness or innuendo. Rather, I have in mind culturally appropriate expressions of respect for his kind of strength, and glad acceptance of his gentlemanly courtesies. Her demeanor-the tone and style and disposition and discourse of her ranking position-can signal clearly her affirmation of the unique role that men should play in relationship to women owing to their sense of responsibility to protect and lead.

It is obvious at this point that we are on the brink of contradiction-suggesting that a woman may hold a position of leadership and fulfill it in a way that signals to men her endorsement of their sense of responsibility to lead. But the complexities of life require of us this risk. To illustrate: it is simply impossible that from time to time a woman not be 42 put in a position of influencing or guiding men. For example, a housewife in her backyard may be asked by a man how to get to the freeway. At that point she is giving a kind of leadership. She has superior knowledge that the man needs and he submits himself to her guidance. But we all know that there is a way for that housewife to direct the man that neither of them feels their mature femininity or masculinity compromised. It is not a contradiction to speak of certain kinds of influence coming from women to men in ways that affirm the responsibility of men to provide a pattern of strength and initiative.

But as I said earlier, there are roles that strain the personhood of man and woman too far to be appropriate, productive and healthy for the overall structure of home and society. Some roles would involve kinds of leadership and expectations of authority and forms of strength as to make it unfitting for a woman to fill the role. However, instead of trying to list what jobs might be fitting expressions for mature femininity or mature masculinity, it will probably be wiser to provide several guidelines.

It is obvious that we cannot and should not prohibit women from influencing men. For example, prayer is certainly a God-appointed means women should use to get men to where God wants them to be. Praying women exert far more power in this world than all political leaders put together. This kind of powerful influence is compounded immensely when one considers the degree to which the world is shaped and guided by the effects of how men and women are formed by their mothers. This influence is perhaps more effective than all the leadership of men put together.

So the question should be put: what kind of influence would be inappropriate for mature women to exercise toward men? It would be hopeless to try to define this on a case-by-case basis. There are thousands of different jobs in the church and in the world with an innumerable variety of relationships between men and women. More appropriate than a black-and-white list of “man’s work” and “woman’s work” is a set of criteria to help a woman think through whether the responsibilities of any given job allow her to uphold God’s created order of mature masculinity and femininity.

Here is one possible set of criteria. All acts of influence and guidance can be described along these two continuums:

Personal\_\_\_\_\_ Non-personal  
Directive\_\_\_\_\_ Non-directive

To the degree that a woman's influence over man is personal and directive it will generally offend a man's good, God-given sense of responsibility and leadership, and thus controvert God's created order. A woman may design the traffic pattern of a city's streets and thus exert a kind of influence over all male drivers. But this influence will be non-personal and therefore not necessarily an offense against God's order. Similarly, the drawings and specifications of a woman architect may guide the behavior of contractors and laborers, but it may be so non-personal that the feminine-masculine dynamic of the relationship is negligible.

On the other hand, the relationship between husband and wife is very personal. All acts of influence lie on the continuum between personal and non-personal. The closer they get to the personal side, the more inappropriate it becomes for women to exert directive influence.

But the second continuum may qualify the first. Some influence is very directive, some is non-directive. For example, a drill sergeant would epitomize directive influence. It would be hard to see how a woman could be a drill sergeant over men without violating their sense of masculinity and her sense of femininity.

Non-directive influence proceeds with petition and persuasion instead of directives. A beautiful example of non-directive leadership is when Abigail talked David out of killing 43 Nabal (1 Samuel 25:23-35). She exerted great influence over David and changed the course of his life; but she did it with amazing restraint and submissiveness and discretion.

When you combine these two continuums, what emerges is this: If a woman's job involves a good deal of directives toward men, they will, in general, need it to be non-personal.

The God-given sense of responsibility for leadership in a mature man will not generally allow him to flourish long under personal, directive leadership of a female superior. J. I. Packer suggested that "a situation in which a female boss has a male secretary" puts strain on the humanity of both (see note 18). I think this would be true in other situations as well. Some of the more obvious ones would be in military combat settings if women were positioned so as to deploy and command men; or in professional baseball if a woman is made the umpire to call balls and strikes and frequently to settle heated disputes among men. And I would stress that this is not necessarily owing to male egotism, but to a natural and good penchant given by God.

Conversely, if a woman's relation to man is very personal, then the way she offers guidance will need to be non-directive. The clearest example here is the marriage relationship. The Apostle Peter speaks of a good wife's meek and tranquil spirit that can be very winsome to her husband (1 Peter 3:4). A wife who "comes on strong" with her advice will probably drive a husband into passive silence, or into active anger.

It is not nonsense to say that a woman who believes she should guide a man into new behavior should do that in a way that signals her support of his leadership. This is precisely what the Apostle Peter commends in 1 Peter 3:1ff. Similarly in the workplace it may not be nonsense in any given circumstance for a woman to provide a certain kind of direction for a man, but to do it in such a way that she signals her endorsement of his unique duty as a man to feel a responsibility of strength and protection and leadership toward her as a woman and toward women in general.

## The Biblical Vision of Complementarity

In the following chapters we hope to show, with more detailed exegetical argumentation, that the vision of masculine and feminine complementarity sketched in this essay is a Biblical vision - not a perfect portrayal of it, no doubt, but a faithful one. This is the way God meant it to be before there was any sin in the world: sinless man, full of love, in his tender, strong leadership in relation to woman; and sinless woman, full of love, in her joyful, responsive support for man's leadership. No belittling from the man, no groveling from the woman. Two intelligent, humble, God-entranced beings living out, in beautiful harmony, their unique and different responsibilities. Sin has distorted this purpose at every level. We are not sinless any more. But we believe that recovery of mature manhood and womanhood is possible by the power of God's Spirit through faith in his promises and in obedience to his Word.

In the home when a husband leads like Christ and a wife responds like the bride of Christ, there is a harmony and mutuality that is more beautiful and more satisfying than any pattern of marriage created by man. Biblical headship for the husband is the divine calling to take primary responsibility for Christlike, servant-leadership, protection and provision in the home. Biblical submission for the wife is the divine calling to honor and affirm her husband's leadership and help carry it through according to her gifts. This is the way of joy. For God loves his people and he loves his glory. And therefore when we follow his idea of marriage (sketched in texts like Genesis 2:18-24; Proverbs 5:15-19; 31:10-31; Mark 10:2-12; Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:18-19; and 1 Peter 3:1-7) we are most satisfied and he is most glorified.

The same is true of God's design for the leadership of the church.<sup>31</sup> The realities of headship and submission in marriage have their counterparts in the church. Thus Paul speaks of authority and submission in 1 Timothy 2:11-12. We will try to show that "authority" refers to the divine calling of spiritual, gifted men to take primary responsibility as elders for Christlike, servant-leadership and teaching in the church. And "submission" refers to the divine calling of the rest of the church, both men and women, to honor and affirm the leadership and teaching of the elders and to be equipped by them for the hundreds and hundreds of various ministries available to men and women in the service of Christ.

That last point is very important. For men and women who have a heart to minister-to save souls and heal broken lives and resist evil and meet needs-there are fields of opportunity that are simply endless. God intends for the entire church to be mobilized in ministry, male and female. Nobody is to be at home watching soaps and ballgames while the world burns. And God intends to equip and mobilize the saints through a company of spiritual men who take primary responsibility for leadership and teaching in the church.

The word "primary" is very important. It signals that there are different kinds and levels of teaching and leading that will not be the sole responsibility of men (Titus 2:3; Proverbs 1:8; 31:26; Acts 18:26). Mature masculinity will seek by prayer and study and humble obedience to discover the pattern of ministry involvement for men and women that taps the gifts of every Christian and honors the God-given order of leadership by spiritual men.

There are many voices today who claim to know a better way to equip and mobilize men and women for the mission of the church. But we believe that manhood and womanhood mesh better in ministry when men take primary responsibility for leadership and teaching in the church; and that mature manhood and womanhood are better preserved, better nurtured, more fulfilled and more fruitful in this church order than in any other.

If I were to put my finger on one devastating sin today, it would not be the so-called women's movement, but the lack of spiritual leadership by men at home and in the church. Satan has achieved an amazing tactical victory by disseminating the notion that the summons for male leadership is born of pride and

fallenness, when in fact pride is precisely what prevents spiritual leadership. The spiritual aimlessness and weakness and lethargy and loss of nerve among men is the major issue, not the upsurge of interest in women's ministries.

Pride and self-pity and fear and laziness and confusion are luring many men into selfprotecting, self-exalting cocoons of silence. And to the degree that this makes room for women to take more leadership it is sometimes even endorsed as a virtue. But I believe that deep down the men-and the women-know better.

Where are the men with a moral vision for their families, a zeal for the house of the Lord, a magnificent commitment to the advancement of the kingdom, an articulate dream for the mission of the church and a tenderhearted tenacity to make it real?

When the Lord visits us from on high and creates a mighty army of deeply spiritual men committed to the Word of God and global mission, the vast majority of women will rejoice over the leadership of these men and enter into a joyful partnership that upholds and honors the beautiful Biblical pattern of mature manhood and mature womanhood.

## Questions for Further Study

1. What teachings concerning a woman's role are hard for women to carry out?
2. What difficulties do you feel a Christian woman faces today in carrying out biblical commands concerning womanhood, including the issue of sexual purity?
3. What kind of husband should a single Christian woman look for to help her in her roles?
4. One of the prime requirements for a wife is communicating well. How is this difficult?
5. A wife must be a helper to her husband. Whether you are married or not, what does this mean to you?
6. Why does the NT teach that a woman must be in subjection to her husband?
7. How can Christian women help each other to fulfill their biblical roles?
8. What godly women have had an impact on your life? What specific biblical practices and principles have they exemplified in their lives? (Use Scripture.)
9. Where have you seen failures of women to obey biblical teaching about what a woman should be? How have you resolved to be different?
10. How should a Christian woman seeking to follow biblical commands go about finding a husband?
11. If you are a Christian wife, what biblical counsel would you give to single women?

## Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning 'standard'; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Spirituality: God is not physical, but immaterial, incorporeal, invisible and alive.
16. Self-existence/Aseity: God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent.
17. Immensity: God is infinite in relation to space.
18. Eternality: God is infinite with regard to time.
19. Simplicity: God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts.
20. Pure actuality: There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way.
21. Necessity: God is uncaused and exists because he must exist.
22. Immutability: God is unchanging and unchangeable.
23. Impassibility: God is incapable of being changed or disturbed by what he experiences and is incapable of suffering.
24. Transcendence: God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him.
25. Immanence: God is present in the world.
26. Infinity: There are no limits to God's person and his perfections.
27. Omnipotence: God can do whatever he wills.
28. Omniscience: God knows everything there is to know.
29. Omnipresence: God is present everywhere in his creation

30. Holiness: God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin.
31. Goodness: A quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace
32. Truth: God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality
33. Love: God's continual communication of himself to his creatures.
34. Benevolence: God's goodness toward his creatures.
35. Mercy: God's goodness toward those who are helpless.
36. Grace: God's goodness toward sinners.
37. Glory: The greatness of God's perfections.
38. Trinity: There is only one true God, existing as a single Being comprised of three Persons who are equal in every way, yet distinct in their tasks and relations to humanity.
39. God's decree: The decree of God is his plan for the universe that includes all things and is certain to come to pass.
40. Providence: God's care for and upholding of his creation.
41. Sovereignty: God's control over his universe.
42. Christology: The study of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
43. Incarnation: The joining of deity and humanity in one person forever. The word is based on the Latin word for flesh: the Lord Jesus Christ is God joined with human flesh.
44. Pre-existence: Used of the Son, it means that he existed before Bethlehem.
45. Theophany: An appearance of God.
46. Christophany: An appearance of Christ.
47. Priesthood: The system that God established to remedy the problem of alienation between a holy God and sinful human beings.
48. Son of God: A name for Jesus that describes his deity and his approval by the Father at the resurrection.
49. Son of Man: A messianic name for Jesus that emphasizes his humanity backed by deity and his role of taking humans to God through suffering and humiliation.
50. Messiah: A transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning 'anointed one'; used of the expected national deliverer of Israel; the linguistic equivalent of Greek *christos*, 'Christ'.
51. Efficacious grace: Efficacious grace is the working of God in an individual that cannot be thwarted and that leads that person to faith in Christ. It is also described as effective calling and irresistible grace.
52. Regeneration: Regeneration is the unseen and unfelt work of the Holy Spirit that overcomes depravity and brings spiritual life and the capacity to please God and exercise faith.
53. Spirit baptism is the nonphysical act of the Spirit of God that places a believer in the Body of Christ and makes him a partaker, along with all other believers, of the work and merits of Christ; should be distinguished from filling, sealing, and indwelling; cannot be felt or noticed, and hence must be appropriated by faith; there is no warrant in Scripture for assuming a second act of God for power, a 'baptism,' after salvation.
54. Sealing is a guarantee that the believer will persevere in Christ all the way to entrance into heaven, when God completes his work of purchasing the individual. It begins at the moment of salvation when the Father places the Holy Spirit in the believer for permanent indwelling. It is unseen and unfelt and should result in praise and obedience to the Spirit.
55. Indwelling is the spiritual presence of the Holy Spirit in every individual who has placed personal trust in Christ as Savior. Described in Jn. 14:17, this is the basis of His other ministries to the believer, such as sealing, anointing and filling and establishes the believer as a part of the spiritual temple that God is building today.
56. The filling of the Spirit is 1) A constant characteristic of a believer's life that consists of regular control by the Spirit that produces Christlikeness through Scripture; 2) A special enablement at particular times for service during the first century.
57. A spiritual gift is a God-given ability for service.

58. A cessationist (with regard to spiritual gifts) is a person who holds that the miraculous gifts are not present in the Church today as part of God's plan.
59. A continualist (with regard to spiritual gifts) is a person who holds that the miraculous gifts are present in the Church today as part of God's plan.
60. An angel is an individual, personal spirit being originally created by God to assist him in his plan for saving the elect.
61. The cosmos is Satan's organized spiritual system, in rebellion against God.
62. A demon is a fallen angel that is free to assist in carrying out Satan's plan of opposition to God.
63. Biblical anthropology is the study of what the Bible teaches about the nature and purpose of human beings.